LINKING MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES: SUBJECT ACCESS THROUGH MUSEUM OBJECTS

Joshua M. Gorman, Collections Coordinator, Spurlock Museum, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, Illinois, U.S.A.

Abstract

Access to information about museum collections is especially important in university museums because of the academic nature of their missions. This paper proposes the use of a ubiquitous tool to provide an additional access point to information about museum collections: the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). Integrating museum objects with the library's monograph collections gives users access to great amounts of potentially relevant information. I have examined a case study conducted at the Spurlock Museum at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, in which LCSH were attached to object records in the museum's database. It was found that LCSH were not efficient tools for the project, therefore, I have examined the possibility of a new tool to do the same work: the LC Class Web.

Introduction

The Spurlock Museum at the University of Illinois has recently opened a new facility after having been temporarily housed in attics and basements, broom-closets and barns for nearly a century. Its collection of 50,000 objects is diverse, holding ethnographic and archaeological collections from across time and around the world.

One of the most resounding requests facing front-of-house staff since the museum opened in September 2002 is for more information on specific artifacts. However, because the museum only recently has acquired a professional staff and has had, in the past, a very catholic collecting strategy, information about items is often not readily available or it is organized inconsistently, if it is known at all.

I began examining how visitor queries could be answered by sending interested parties to the library to find the information on their own. By linking Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), this project is intended to facilitate library use by museum audiences, enabling interested parties to incorporate material culture items into traditional research and hopefully include the museum in the process.

This paper discusses a case study in which the artifacts in a gallery at the Spurlock Museum at the University of Illinois are given LCSH access points. The LCSH enable the artifacts to interact with the University Library system, and they provide researchers with a resource for more information about the objects in the Museum's collection.

Why LCSH?

Libraries have been very adept at adopting standards for the classification and cataloguing of books. These standards, often adopted internationally, allow the great deal of variation present in libraries and their holdings. The Library of Congress has developed a cataloguing system that supports flexible collecting for vastly different institutions. LCSH allow researching at the patron's level through authority-based subject searching.

In this project, I do not propose that museum objects be catalogued using library standards. Although it has been shown that library organizational schemes can work for museum cataloguing, registrars are often reluctant to adopt them (Beirbaum 1990). I am proposing that LCSH be linked to objects through the object database in order for museum objects to give access into library catalogues.

The library is one of the most used tools on campus. There can be little excuse for students who do not know how to use the library and do not do so regularly. By using traditional library tools for the integration of material culture into traditional academic research, we hopefully can encourage more researchers to use objects in their research. As students enter universities having used computers for the entirety of their education, they often demand that information be available to them immediately. This is true for information about the objects in museums.

By offering a point of entry into the library, we perhaps can encourage researchers to look beyond the limited knowledge and bibliographic information about collections like the Spurlock Museum's. This lack of information, a result of years of understaffing and neglect of the collections catalogue, can be redressed if we can provide ready access to information and thus facilitate active research by people outside the museum.

The primary impetus for this project is the Spurlock Museum's lack of an active research program. There is neither staff dedicated to researching collections or encouraged accessibility for external research. If the Museum is to distinguish itself as a University Museum (as opposed to a museum at/in a university), a research program must be created. If this project can facilitate integration of the Museum's collections into undergraduate research, we can get quality research

about our collections to contribute to our knowledge base.

I feel that it is key to focus our energies on facilitating undergraduate materials-based research. If we can convince the next generation of scholars, policy makers and general public that university museums provide access to objects that are necessary for basic research, then the community may be sufficiently engaged to protect the university museum from obscurity.

Linking the Spurlock Museum's objects to the monographs in the Library directly benefits the campus community in many ways. Current University budget restrictions encourage innovative cross-campus collaborations like this one. Although in the past museums and libraries have often worked quite closely at the UIUC, this collaboration has been traditionally hard-pressed. There is a benefit to the Library, as this may encourage library usage by those students who may be otherwise remiss to use the library. It also provides a link to museums for libraries increasingly engaged in interpretive programs that traditionally have been in the realm of museums.

To the Spurlock Museum's further advantage, we can provide research resources without maintaining a separate library within the Museum. By relying on the University Library, we do not have to hire a librarian to maintain a library on site. The library's 10 million volumes are ample to cover our required knowledge base.

Main Section

This study had two distinct objectives: to determine the feasibility of adding LCSH to 50,000 object records and to determine the usefulness of the outcomes. It seemed obvious from the outset that it would take time to add these data to the object records, but I wanted to explore what the true cost of such a project would be and whether the benefits would make it worth doing (and whether, perhaps, the project might attract external funding).

The first step in the study was to familiarize myself with the current cataloguing and classification literature. Once a solid understanding was gained of how cataloguing works, I had to evaluate how objects are viewed.

This study originated with the idea to add some LC Subject Headings to our existing object records, which would enable users to identify relevant topics in the library catalogue. We encountered three main issues to resolve.

1. From what perspectives will users look at objects?
2. How broad of an entry into the library do we want?
3. Do LC Subject headings offer enough breadth?

We soon realized that researchers would be looking at objects in multiple ways. For example, this artillery shell (Fig. 1) could be looked at as an example of artillery shells or as representative of modern armament and warfare. It also could be examined in provenance research or in regard to its donor. Materials and manufacturing could also be the focus of the research of this item. Our solution for this problem was to determine 10 ways in which people could examine and research an item (called genres) and to offer terms for corresponding subject searching.

Concepts to be covered by LCSH in database:

1. Geographical location from which item came
2. About period in which item was made/used
3. About item type
4. About culture
5. Material
6. Technology to make
7. About donor
8. History of item or item type
9. Maker
10. Provenance

After determining the data structure, it was necessary to modify the museum object database and to begin assembling the Subject Headings.

LC Subject Headings are arranged hierarchically. The more terms are added, the more specific the heading becomes. If we take our artillery shell as an example and use the LC Subject Heading "Artillery," we receive 271 entries from the University of Illinois Library and 21 from the local Urbana Free Library. If we focus the term to "Artillery—Usage—World War—1914–1918," we get one entry from the University library and none from Urbana Free. Educators and Librarians often prefer a search with many results. This broad source matrix offers students a way to structure their arguments and a larger pool from which to draw their research.

The major problem with LCSH is that one term, while it may be related to other terms, does not

Fig. 1. Photograph by kind permission of the Sperlock Museum.

necessarily link to it. For example, someone searching for the term "artillery" may also be interested in the terms "armament," "warfare," "cannon," "projectile" and many other terms. This presents a problem with the current Library catalogue, as only one Subject Heading can be searched for at a time. Therefore, we can add only one Subject Heading per category per object. This is wholly inadequate in the way that Subject Headings are structured. Often, more than one term would be appropriate for the same concept. Furthermore, LCSH are not compatible with the Dewey Decimal Classification system (another widely used library tool, particularly in primary school libraries).

Results and Concluding Remarks

I found that it took a lot of knowledge of both LCSH and the collections—a combination that no one currently has in the Spurlock museum—to correlate the two. As such, it took nearly 45 minutes per item to add the Subject Headings to the object files. This resulted in a total time of 45 labor-hours for the 60 items surveyed. While this is excessive, it should be noted that, because of similarity in collections, some of the Subject Headings used for these items can be expanded to roughly 15,000 items. For example, our artillery shell shares its headings with the other 12 shells from that same accession group. It shares the time period headings with the 227 items in the collection from WWI. Similarly, our Roman fibula shares its culture and time period subject headings with 1643 items in our collection.

Although these incidental connections would decrease the overall time for adding LCSH to the entire collection (with at least a few SH for each item), the problems with the system remain. These incidental connections may prove to be just as useful if using another system.

Despite the benefits that this linkage of objects to the library potentially could provide, the time/cost requirements of enacting this linkage and the inherent failures of LCSH mean that this project cannot progress out of concept stages. It simply will cost too much to add LCSH to the collection of the Spurlock Museum. However, in the progress of this project, another, perhaps more appropriate, system was discovered.

One theme throughout this conference has been for university museums to gain relevance to the university community as a whole. I think that this kind of linkage could be used as a tool to gain relevance by allying the museum with a proven university mainstay, the university library. Also, by adding a library-based component to museum objects, we are training students to use material culture in their studies, and promoting hands-on training. Including students in research and staffing plans furthers the training of our future colleagues and those who will carry our profession through this century.

I have begun looking at a tool that the Library of Congress is currently assembling: Class Web. This tool will enable users to search for a subject heading and find the classification schedule in which that subject heading is most often found. The system will provide up to 10 closely related subject headings that are also found in the corresponding classification schedule (with similar classification numbers). This will allow users to find terms related to the term they have in mind through the classification number. This also enables easy access to libraries equipped with the DDC system, because LCC can be related to DDC.

The Class Web's syndectic data structure potentially can provide horizontal, multi-tier access to information. However, the system is still in testing phases and still requires a point of entry. I am currently working with Professor Emerita Pauline Cochrane of the University of Illinois and her doctoral classification class to try to find ways in which that first step can be made into the class web system. I then may examine if the system is useful.

This system requires consistent metadata in the museum object files. Location, culture, name and other data should come from established thesauri and authorities. If consistent data are used in the classification of museum objects, it then may be possible to map these data into the class web system mechanically, providing usable results. Otherwise, the process remains a manual one and the time/cost component may become prohibitive again.

Contact

Joshua M. Gorman
Collections Coordinator
Spurlock Museum
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
600 South Gregory Street
Urbana, Illinois 61801
U.S.A.
Tel: 217-333-4907
Email: jmgorman@uiuc.edu

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Works Cited

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